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ABSTRACT

Parent involvement in a child's education consists of schools and parents working together to achieve maximum educational growth for their children. Parents are the critical link between their children and school, and research demonstrates that parent attitudes and behavior influence children's school achievement. Parent involvement occurs when parents: (1) receive and react to information provided by the school; (2) provide information to the school; (3) serve on advisory committees; (4) participate in complaint resolution; (5) serve as school volunteers; (6) participate in home visitations; and (7) assist in teaching. Although the primary responsibility for encouraging good parent-school relations lies with the school, parents must also become interested participants in the school program. Schools can increase parent involvement 12 ways: (1) inviting parents to school open houses; (2) holding parent-teacher conferences; (3) involving parents in homework and home-learning; (4) maintaining one-on-one communication with parents; (5) initiating personalized telephone contact; (6) making home visits; (7) publishing home-school handbooks; (8) distributing newsletters; (9) involving single and working parents; (10) involving parents at the secondary level; (11) involving bilingual parents; and (12) developing parent-workshops. (A U.S. Department of Education pamphlet "What Works: Research about Teaching and Learning" is reprinted as an appendix.) (TM)

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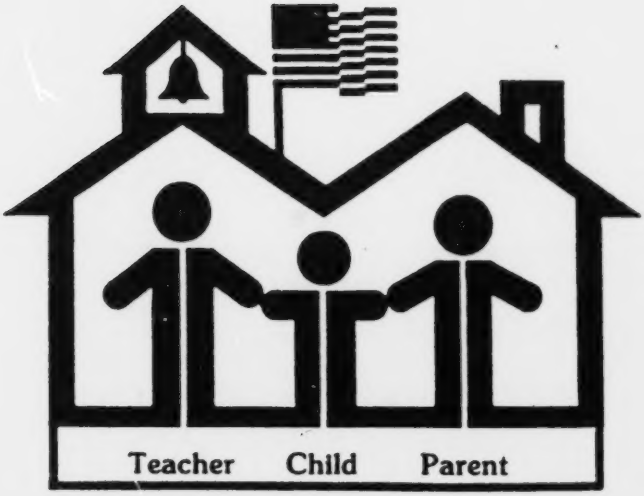
PARENT INVOLVEMENT: THE CRITICAL LINK



Preface

Children are the world's greatest resource, and both parents and schools play an important role in the life of each child. There has been a growing need for information which could guide parents and schools in their cooperative effort to help each child reach his or her full potential.

This booklet is designed to help meet that need. The reasons for involving parents in the education of their children are discussed. But, more importantly, this booklet highlights various forms of parent involvement and the associated responsibilities of the school and the parents.

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What is Parent Involvement?

Parent Involvement is the act of schools and parents working together to achieve maximum educational growth for their children. Together, the school, parents, and their children form a full partnership in which the parents are a critical link between their children and the school. Parent involvement is an ongoing, changing and developing process which results in significant outcomes for all who participate.

Why is Parent Involvement Important?

Realistically, schools alone cannot meet all of the educational needs of children. The partnership between the school and parents to educate children is made even more necessary in light of the research findings about factors which influence student achievement. A number of studies report a strong improvement of children's school achievement. Although the relationship is subtle and complex, it has been found that when parents show a strong interest in their children's schooling, they promote the development of attitudes which are the key to achievement.

In fact, recent research reveals that student attitudes are the most important influence on school achievement. These attitudes originate in the family, but they have more to do with the way the family interacts than with its social class or income. For example, whether parents read to their children or talk to them about their school work has much more influence on children's school achievement than socio-economic status.

The attitudes which appear to be highly significant are the child's self-concept and sense of control over the environment. Accordingly, children with parents who feel their actions affect the environment and who participate in school affairs will have strong attitudes of self-importance and control over the environment. Conversely, children will feel that their lives are controlled by others if their parents feel powerless and unimportant and avoid participating in their children's education. Consequently, it has been determined that parent involvement indirectly, as well as directly, produces gains in children's school achievement. Involving parents leads children to feel effectual, competent, and important, thereby creating a positive self-concept and a family environment that stimulates and reinforces achievement. Clearly, parent participation is vital to the success of education as a whole and, therefore, deserves to be strengthened.

How is Parent Involvement Accomplished?

Forms of Parent Involvement

There are numerous ways to involve parents in the education of their children. The purpose of this section is to identify different forms of parent involvement and briefly describe each. Figure 1, which follows, summarizes various forms of parent involvement.

The extent to which parents are actively involved and the duration of that involvement vary greatly as evidenced by the forms listed in Figure 1.

There is even considerable diversity within any one form of parent involvement, depending upon the actual parental activities. To illustrate this point, consider the form of parent involvement titled, "Parents Receive and React to Information Provided by the School." A review of the variations of that form described below reveals that it encompasses some activities that are more passive while other are very active; and some activities are of short or temporary duration while others are ongoing and long term.

I. **Parents Receive and React to Information Provided by the School**

The school provides information to the parents.

The parents, in this instance, are seen as recipients with the expectation that they will not act; or at least their reactions will be minimal. Examples would be sharing information about school district policy, staffing, school programs publications, student handbooks, budgets, etc.

The school provides information to the parents and requests their action.

In this case, the school does expect parents to respond more specifically to the information offered by the school. Examples of this type would be newsletters, open houses, back-to-school nights, etc. In most situations, the parents' response will be short in duration and infrequent, as in the instance of attending an open house upon request.

Forms of Parent Involvement

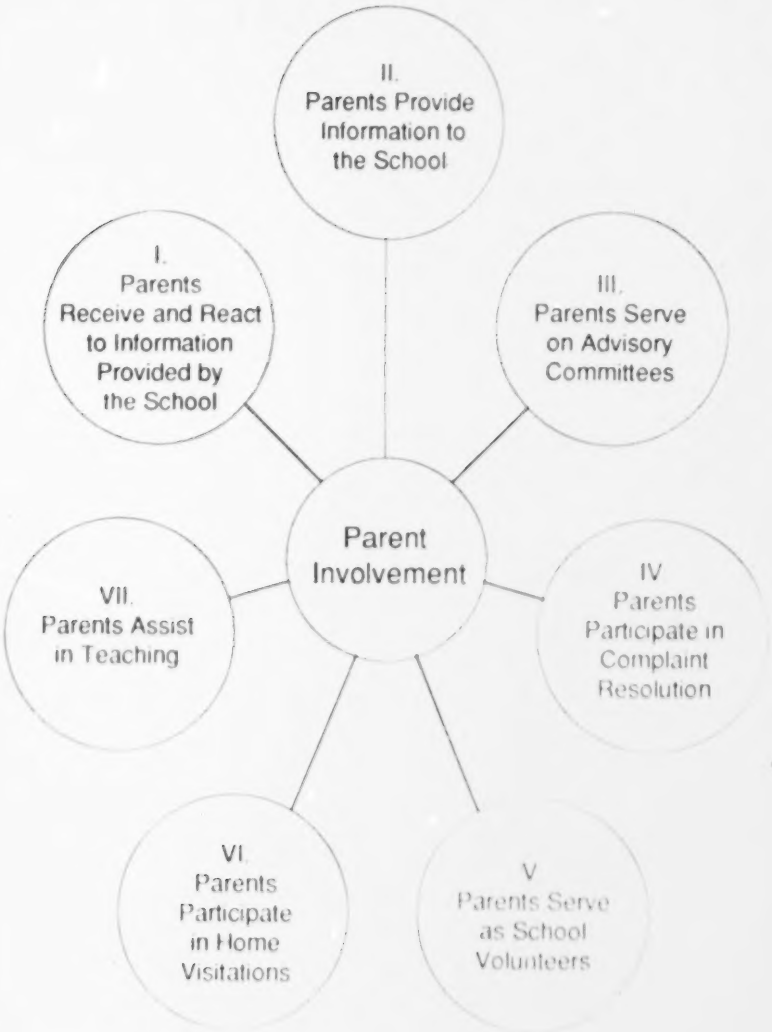

Figure 1

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The school provides information to the parents to seek specific solutions to problems identified by the school.

The school pinpoints areas that might require parent evaluation and problem-solving, and the parent is placed in the role of the decision maker/problem solver. In this instance, parents act on an individual basis, not as a group. An example of this would be the school's request for a child's parents to review the available information and then identify their child's specific needs and corresponding educational goals.

The school provides referral information to the parents so that they may seek help beyond the institution of the school.

The school provides information to the parents so they, in turn, can seek a solution to any educational problems that may have been identified. The school acts as a referral agency or source.

The school provides information to the parents about parenting.

In this case, information in provided by the outside agencies sponsored by the school. Informational sessions are set up for parents so they can learn how to deal more effectively with their children, primarily with regard to the areas of discipline, self-concept development, behavior modification, personal management, etc. The overall intent of sharing information about parenting skills is to improve family communication and interpersonal awareness.

The school provides information to the parents about parents' rights and advocacy.

A structure is set up by the school that enables parents to be informed about their educational rights. The information is provided in a general way to parents so that they can better understand how to deal effectively with the educational bureaucracy or school system. It may further involve parent advocates who assist and counsel other parents in dealing proficiently with the school system.

The other forms of parent involvement are listed on the following pages and variations of forms are described.

II. Parents Provide Information to the School

Parents provide information about their children to the school.

The purpose of this parent involvement is to make the school more responsive to their children's needs. Parents attempt to sensitize the school to information that they feel is critical to the understanding of their children and how their children can most benefit from the school's instructional program. In this case, the school functions in a receiving role.

Parents provide information about the educational program to the school.

This parent response may be solicited by the school or it may be spontaneous. Parents, either singly or as a group, are placed in the role of reviewing and reacting to different aspects of the educational program. The parent response to a particular topic is informal and of short duration.

III. Parents Serve on Advisory Committees

A specific committee or group may be established to systematically review and respond to different facets of the educational program. In this situation, the involvement of parents and other citizens in the community is quite structured, focuses on special issues or topics, and is typically ongoing in nature. The groups involving parents in such ways include parent advisory committees or councils, ad hoc committees, and task forces. The topics to be addressed might include student progress, reporting systems, student guidance, etc. Some advisory councils are required by school board policy or in response to federal regulations for particular programs.

IV. Parents Participate in Complaint Resolution

The school may establish procedures for handling parent's complaints regarding school practices and procedures. Parents may be involved either by serving on a complaint resolution board or by presenting a complaint to the board.

V. Parents Serve as School Volunteers

Parents can support the efforts of the school by serving as volunteers. This includes activities both inside and outside the classroom. Examples would be helping in the library, operating copying equipment, correcting tests, distributing materials, supervising extracurricular activities, recruiting new parent volunteers, etc.

VI. Parents Participate in Home Visitations

This activity entails school staff visiting the parents in their homes. The home visitations are designed for school staff to obtain further information about the children's home environment, while parents can obtain information from school staff about their children's needs and educational progress. The home visitations are intended to create parents' support and cooperation and help to build a rapport with school staff.

VII. Parents Assist in Teaching

Parents can also support the efforts of the school by assisting in teaching either at home or at school. The school may identify activities and events that will foster and enhance the children's learning at home and in school. The school may even provide training programs to assist parents so they can work cooperatively with the school to help their children learn. This form of parent involvement results in the greatest gain in children's education achievement.

Schools' and Parents' Responsibilities Related to Parent Involvement

Parents should be helped to realize that they need to support the school in its effort to educate their children. Finding ways and means to educate children must become a challenge for the parents just as it is for the school. The goals of parents for their children should compliment those of the school. Furthermore, the goals of both the school and the home, which exert tremendous influence on the development of the child, should reinforce each other. The primary responsibility for establishing good relations between the school and the home rests with the school. However, the parents, too, must become interested and supportive participants in the school program. Attitudes are improved and understanding is increased as a result of positive interaction among the children, their parents and the school.

Since the school and parents jointly share responsibility for fostering parent involvement, it is useful to identify some of the other major responsibilities of each group. Concerning the school's responsibilities, the school must first get to know the parents and establish a comfortable, positive rapport with them. This is of paramount importance because it is the foundation for effectively interacting with parents to create and maintain parent involvement.

Probably one of the next most important asks is for the school to clearly communicate its sincere commitment to involve parents in the education of their children. It is imperative that the school then follow through and truly involve parents, not just create superficial participation for parents. If the school asks parents to serve on an advisory committee or participate in a decision-making activity, respect must be shown for the parents' recommendations. If parents are encouraged to voice complaints and grievances, then the school must be responsive. The school needs to consistently communicate the value placed on the importance of parent involvement. Moreover, the school needs to assess parents' current participation and then determine what the school needs to do to proficiently involve them. The school must consider alternative ways to involve parents.

Fulfilling its traditional role, it continues to be the responsibility of the school to provide a well-balanced educational program for all children. This includes staying abreast of the newest, most effective methods of teaching and utilizing community resources to create a sound instructional program. Furthermore, the school needs to regularly inform parents of the school's expectations of their children and provide feedback about children's actual performance. For only then can parents select the most appropriate actions for the situation and have their involvement contribute in the most positive way to the educational progress of their children. The school must continuously encourage that parent participation.

Regarding the parents' responsibilities for supporting and enhancing parent involvement, parents must learn of and stay informed about their children's educational programs. Closely related to being informed about the school programs is the need of parents to make the effort to become acquainted with the school staff and develop a positive rapport with them. Once that rapport has been established, it is important for parents to clearly communicate to the schools their intent to become involved. That commitment must then translate into action. In addition, parents need to assume partial responsibility for identifying ways that they can support the school's efforts. And continuing to fulfill their traditional role, the parents must be aware of their children's needs related to their intellectual, physical, social, and

emotional growth and development. The parents should also seek to increase their skills to interact productively with their children.

A final responsibility applies to both the school and the parents. In the past, each group has had a great number of misconceptions about the other regarding parent involvement. It is essential that the school and parents both eliminate these misconceptions and thereby prevent the misunderstandings that have previously undermined parent involvement.

12 Strategies to Increase Parent Involvement

1. Open Houses

Schools need to share with all parents information about their programs, activities, and accomplishments. One of the most successful ways of sharing is the open house. Open houses work best if schools:

- Hold them just once or twice a year.
- Schedule them at times of low "calendar conflict."
- Attend to the 3 Ps—publicity, planning, and preparation.

2. Parent-Teacher Conferences

One of the most essential building blocks of home-school communication is the parent-teacher conference. Conferences should be scheduled on a regular basis for all parents, not only for those whose children are experiencing problems. Parents provide important perspectives and information that can be extremely valuable. Teachers need the help of parents to do the best possible job of educating every child and can help parents play an active education role at home.

Conferences are successful when teachers and the school system create a climate that invites collaboration with parents. Creating this climate involves planning and effort. The following suggestions indicate ways in which teachers and school systems can maximize the effectiveness of parent-teacher conferences before, during, and after the conference.

3. Involving Parents In Homework And Home-Learning

Research indicates that involving parents as educators at home with their children is one of the most effective approaches to improving

students' attitudes toward school. This form of parent involvement does not require the parent to come to the school, which makes it more accessible for some parents. While research indicates that homework supervision and home learning activities are closely related to higher achievement scores for children, these approaches involve the combined efforts of the school system and individual teachers to make them work.

4. **One-On-One Communication: Ideas and Strategies**

There are many ways in which schools engage in ongoing positive communication with parents. One-on-one communication can be used to inform parents about school policies and programs, share "good news" about students, and let parents know about the school's desire to have them involved in the school.

5. **The Positive Phone Program**

Imagine the impact it has when parents receive phone calls letting them know how much progress their children have made in their reading in the last three weeks - or - asking if they need any information about school programs and expectations. Home-school communication is greatly increased through personalized positive telephone contact between teachers and parents. When a telephone call from school carries information that is positive, the atmosphere between the home and the school is improved.

"Positive Phone Programs" require strong support from school administrators, who must provide teachers with the time and resources needed to implement these programs. In addition, teachers should be involved in the planning of these programs to ensure their commitment to making them effective.

6. **The Home Visitation Program**

A Home Visitation Program can:

- Signify the willingness of the school to "go more than halfway" to involve parents in their children's education.
- Give parents a clear message that the school is caring and concerned about communication with parents.
- Increase the level of trust between the school and its parents.
- Increase the level of willingness to come into the school.

7. **The Home-School Handbook**

The home-school handbook is an important foundation for home-school communication and can set the tone for home-school partnership. Schools find that handbooks are most effective when careful attention is paid to their content, preparation process, dissemination, and use as a tool for encouraging parent involvement.

8. **Newsletters**

Newsletters are used by many schools as their major form of school-home communication. A quality newsletter may well be the most effective way of reaching parents and informing them of the school's activities and expectations.

As their name implies, "newsletters" provide readers with "news" in an informal "letter" style. Their function is to inform, announce, teach, interest, and in other ways communicate. Newsletters are useful when careful thought is given to: "Why have a newsletter?" "Who is it for?" "What do we want to communicate?" "How should we present the information?"

9. **Involving Single and Working Parents**

Many children in our schools live in single parent families, step-families, foster families, and other "reconstructed" family configurations. In addition, most children live in a household in which both parents work, resulting in many children coming home from school to an empty house. Involving single and working parents, as well as noncustodial parents who may live in different cities or states, in their children's education presents many challenges to schools.

10. **Involving Secondary Level Parents**

Research and experience indicate that parent participation falls off in the secondary school years. This reduced involvement occurs not because parents become less interested in their children's education. Rather, four issues emerge at the secondary school level that affect parent involvement: the structure of secondary schools, the curriculum, adolescence, and working parents of older children.

11. **Involving Bilingual Parents**

Schools have found that involving bilingual parents in their children's education can present special challenges. Creative approaches may be required as schools work to become partners with parents who have different cultural backgrounds and who speak limited English. In order to be successful in actively involving these parents, educators must understand two basic principles:

Principle 1: School systems need to indicate their commitment to involving bilingual parents. The practices of the school and the degree to which the involvement of bilingual parents is taken seriously by educators will make the difference in whether bilingual parents actually become involved with their children's schooling.

Principle 2: Educators must acquire cultural awareness and sensitivity.

12. **Developing Parent Workshops**

Parent education can include activities, workshops, and materials that are designed to provide parents with skills or experiences that help them as parents and as individuals. As this education supports parents, it also helps children and provides parents with opportunities to participate in the education of their children.

Successful parent workshops require careful planning and implementation. The step-by-step process schools have found effective is written out in the Parent Involvement Open House packet available free from the Chapter 1 office at the Oregon Department of Education, 700 Pringle Parkway SE, Salem, Oregon 97310-0290.

Conclusions

In summary, parent involvement is a critical component of children's education. Studies have revealed that parent involvement results in children developing positive self-attitudes which are the most significant influence on school achievement. Consequently, parent involvement is necessary for children to be able to reach their full potential.

There are numerous ways to involve parents in the education of their children. The following list classifies seven different forms of parent involvement, of which there are variations within each form.

I. Parents Receive and React to Information Provided by the School
II. Parents Provide Information to the School
III. Parents Serve on Advisory Committees
IV. Parents Participate in Complaint Resolution
V. Parents Serve as School Volunteers
VI. Parents Participate in Home Visitations
VII. Parents Assist in Teaching

All of these result in positive effects on children's achievement levels, but the single most productive form of parent involvement is assisting in teaching their children at home on a regular basis. And lastly, regardless of the form of parent participation, the parents and the school jointly share responsibility for establishing and maintaining parent involvement.

Appendix A

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WHAT WORKS

RESEARCH ABOUT TEACHING AND LEARNING

U.S. Department of Education

Research Finding

Parents are their children's first and most influential teachers. What parents do to help their children learn is more important to academic success than how well-off the family is.

Comment

Parents can do many things at home to help their children succeed in school. Unfortunately, recent evidence indicates that many parents are doing much less than they might. For example, American mothers on average spend less than half an hour a day talking, explaining, or reading with their children. Fathers spend less than 15 minutes.

They can create a "curriculum of the home" that teaches their children what matters. They do this through their daily conversations, household routines, attention to school matters, and affectionate concern for their children's progress.

Conversation is important. Children learn to read, reason, and understand things better when their parents:
- read, talk, and listen to them,
- tell them stories, play games, share hobbies, and
- discuss news, TV programs, and special events.

In order to enrich the "curriculum of the home," some parents:
- provide books, supplies, and a special place for studying,
- observe routine for meals, bedtime, and homework, and
- monitor the amount of time spent watching TV and doing after-school jobs.

Parents stay aware of their children's lives at school when they:
- discuss school events,
- help children meet deadlines, and
- talk with their children about school problems and successes.

Research on both gifted and disadvantaged children shows that home efforts can greatly improve student achievement. For example, when parents of disadvantaged children take the steps listed above, their children can do as well at school as the children of more affluent families.

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Research Finding

The best way for parents to help their children become better readers is to read to them—even when they are very young. Children benefit most from reading aloud when they discuss stories, learn to identify letters and words, and talk about the meaning of words.

Comment

The specific skills required for reading come from direct experience with written language. At home, as in school, the more reading the better.

Parents can encourage their children's reading in many ways. Some tutor informally by pointing out letters and words on signs and containers. Others use more formal tools, such as workbooks. But children whose parents simply read to them perform as well as those whose parents use workbooks or have had training in teaching.

The conversation that goes with reading aloud to children is as important as the reading itself. When parents ask children only superficial questions about stories, or don't discuss the stories at all, their children do not achieve as well in reading as the children of parents who ask questions that require thinking and who relate the stories to everyday events. Kindergarten children who know a lot about written language usually have parents who believe that reading is important and who seize every opportunity to act on that conviction by reading to their children.

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Independent Reading

Research Finding

Children improve their reading ability by reading a lot. Reading achievement is directly related to the amount of reading children do in school and outside.

Comment

Independent reading increases both vocabulary and reading fluency. Unlike using workbooks and performing computer drills, reading books gives children practice in the "whole act" of reading, that is, both in discovering the meanings of individual words and in grasping the meaning of an entire story. But American children do not spend much time reading independently at school or at home. In the average elementary school, for example, children spend just 7 to 8 minutes a day reading silently. At home, half of all fifth graders spend only 4 minutes a day reading. These same children spend an average of 130 minutes a day watching television.

Research shows that the amount of leisure time spent reading is directly related to children's reading comprehension, the size of their vocabularies, and the gains in their reading ability. Clearly, reading at home can be a powerful supplement to classwork. Parents can encourage leisure reading by making books an important part of the home, by giving books or magazines as presents, and by encouraging visits to the local library.

Another key to promoting independent reading is making books easily available to children through classroom libraries. Children in classrooms that have libraries read more, have better attitudes about reading, and make greater gains in reading comprehension than children in classrooms without libraries.

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Research Finding

Parental involvement helps children learn more effectively. Teachers who are successful at involving parents in their children's schoolwork are successful because they work at it.

Comment

Most parents want to be involved with their children's schoolwork but are unsure of what to do or how to do it. Many say they would welcome more guidance and ideas from teachers. But it takes more than occasional parent-teacher conferences and school open houses to involve parents. Teachers who are successful at promoting parent participation in the early grades use strategies like these:

- Some teachers ask parents to read aloud to the child, to listen to the child read, and to sign homework papers.
- Others encourage parents to drill students on math and spelling and to help with homework lessons.
- Teachers also encourage parents to discuss school activities with their children and suggest ways parents can help teach their children at home. For example, a simple home activity might be alphabetizing books; a more complex one would be using kitchen supplies in an elementary science experiment.
- Teachers also send home suggestions for games or group activities related to the child's schoolwork that parent and child can play together.

Teachers meet parents' wishes for face-to-face contact by inviting them to the classroom to see how their children are being taught. This first-hand observation shows parents how the teacher teaches and gives parents ideas on what they can do at home.

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Research Finding

Unexcused absences decrease when parents are promptly informed that their children are not attending school.

Comment

Absences are a major problem at all levels of school. Students who miss a lesson lose an opportunity to learn. Too many missed opportunities can result in failure, dropping out of school, or both. Research indicates parer want to hear promptly if their children have poor grades, are creating discipline problems, or have unexcused absences.

Schools have different ways of letting parents know when their children aren't in school. Some use staff members to check attendance records and phone the parents of absent students. Others have begun using automatic calling devices that leave a recorded message with parents. The usual message is a request to contact the school about the absence. These devices can be programmed to call back if no answer is received. Schools using such devices report substantial increases in attendance.

Good attendance in school is another example of the connection of time and learning. Just as homework amplifies learning, regular attendance exposes students to a greater amount of academic content and instructior Students, of course, must concentrate on their lessons in order to benefit from attendance.

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Research finding

Belief in the value of hard work, the importance of personal responsibility, and the importance of education itself contributes to greater success in school.

Commentary

The ideals that children hold have important implications for their school experiences. Children who believe in the value of hard work and responsibility and who attach importance to education are likely to have higher academic achievement and fewer disciplinary problems than those who do not have these ideals. They are also less likely to drop out of school. Such children are more likely to use their out-of-school time in ways that reinforce learning. For example, high school students who believe in hard work, responsibility, and the value of education spend about 3 more hours a week on homework than do other students. This is a significant difference since the average student spends only about 5 hours a week doing homework.

Parents can improve their children's chances for success by emphasizing the importance of education, hard work, and responsibility, and by encouraging their children's friendships with peers who have similar values. The ideals that students, their parents, and their peers hold are more important than a student's socioeconomic and ethnic background in predicting academic success.

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